One Korean’s Approach to Buddhism: The Mom/Momjit Paradigm (review)

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Philosophy East and West, Volume 61, Number 3, July 2011, pp. 576-578 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai‘i Press

DOI: 10.1353/pew.2011.0033

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relations between you (being/somethingness) and wu (nonbeing/absence) as described in the Laozi.

This book is a splendid testament to Bai Tongdong’s analytical rigor and philosophical breadth. Any scholar of Chinese or contemporary political thought will profit from it greatly, and those who are fond of conceptual precision and “close readings” of texts will find it a satisfying break from some of the breezier work on Chinese political thought. For all of these reasons it surely qualifies as a unique and exceptionally valuable contribution to the Chinese literature in this area.

Notes


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One conceptual paradigm that characterizes East Asian Buddhism is nondualism. This paradigm challenges the fundamentals of some philosophies that accept the idea of certain binary oppositions, such as self and other, phenomenon and noumenon, and subject and object. Nondualism does not negate the separate existence of the two poles that comprise such binaries; instead, it suggests that these binary oppositions are in fact inseparably related to each other and that the identity of each is possible only through mutual recognition. The idea of interrelatedness between two opposites does not mean that seeing two separate identities is an illusion, as is sometimes the misunderstanding with regard to Buddhism’s view of the physical world. Nondualism admits the existence of separate entities, but at the same time it confirms their relationship as “nondual,” since the identity of the one is always related to that of the other. Here arises a major difficulty of nondualism both as a philosophical paradigm and as a religious soteriology. How does one aptly recognize, understand, and even practice this paradox of identity as non-identity?

One Korean’s Approach to Buddhism: The Mom/Momjit Paradigm by Sung Bae Park deals with this specific issue on various levels. The Korean words mom (meaning the body) and momjit (bodily functions or movements) are used by the author to try to reinterpret the well-known East Asian paradigm of tiyung (Korean ch’eyong). Ti
(literally “body”) and yung (literally “function”) are usually translated as “essence” and “function,” respectively. The English expressions already suggest a potential problem in conceptualizing tiyung due to linguistic connotations: “essence” and “function” seem to be in a hierarchical relationship, and they give the impression of being an abstract conceptualization. By employing the expressions mom (body) and momjit (bodily functions), Park indicates not only the nonduality of body and bodily activity but their physicality and actuality in one’s daily life. That is, body/bodily function is concerned not with abstract concepts but embodied reality, reminding us of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh (la chair), through which he explains the chiasmic relationship of the visible and invisible.

In his explanation of the mom/momjit paradigm, Park incorporates the variety of personal experience, which makes the book more accessible for those who are not familiar with Buddhism; to those who are already well-versed in Buddhism, it demonstrates how to apply or understand Buddhist philosophy in everyday life. The author tells us that the expressions mom and momjit used by Zen Master T'oeung Sŏngch’ŏl (1912–1993) during a visit to the master in 1965 when the author was a young assistant professor and advisor for the Seekers after Truth, a group of fifteen male college students who were attempting to practice Buddhism in a more authentic and rigorous way than would be expected of a regular lay practitioner. The purpose of the visit was to ask for advice to resolve the difficulties that this group faced in practicing Buddhism, and the master’s answer was, in brief, that their difficulty arose because the group approached the issues they were dealing with through momjit (bodily movements) and not through mom (body). This advice completely changed the author’s philosophical and religious perspective, marking the beginning of his more than forty years of reflection on the mom/momjit paradigm.

How do we define mom and momjit? The author attempts several definitions: mom is “invisible” and “indescribable”; it is “universality itself,” whereas momjit is its counterparts, “visible,” “descriptive,” and “particularity.” In terms of religious discourse, the author explains, mom designates the “absolute and religious,” whereas momjit represents the “ordinary.” Park also employs the image of a tree: the roots are the body, and the trunk and branches are bodily functions, reminding us of the image of a tree in the Daodejing in the explanation of the relationship between Dao (path) and de (virtue). With this brief description of mom and momjit, one might wonder if the binary expressions “visible and invisible,” “universality and particularity,” and “absolute and ordinary” indicate the dual nature of what belongs to each category rather than their nonduality. This shows us the limits of our philosophical imagination when the same language is employed to indicate what are sometimes two opposite concepts. A better explanation, in my view, comes from Park’s example of a human relationship. When two people meet, the meeting itself is a momjit, and what happens before and after the meeting is more concerned with mom (p. 17). A meeting is only an event that is visible and subject to physical time, but the relationship of two people is not defined by only this meeting, which has a clear beginning and end, but by what had happened before and after the time of the meeting. The visible reality is
not a fragmented event but the parts or manifestations of a totality that have accumulated over an unspecified period of time. In this sense, one might be able to compare the concept of *mom* to what Jacques Derrida calls “trace,” the totality of the invisible elements that constitute the identity of visible reality.

Park applies the *mom/momjit* paradigm to the main tenets of two major East Asian Buddhist traditions, Zen and Huayan. Zen teaching, according to the author, warns of the “eternalization” of *momjit*. Each *momjit*, or event in the world—event in this case meaning all types of occurrences including thinking and the biological activity of one’s body—appears to be fragmented and separate, but it also represents the totality of all that constitutes each and every event. Zen teaches that once one frees oneself from the habitualized tendency of taking a fragmentary *momjit* for the whole and is able to see “both” a separate identity and the invisible totality that it contains, then one is liberated. The invisible in this case does not merely indicate that a certain shape or color is not seen; instead, it means excess, incalculability, or openness—and so does *mom*. In order to challenge habitual thinking, a radical transformation is required. Park suggests that Zen hwadu practice, which he defines as “questioning meditation” in another publication, serves the function of facilitating such a transformation. The function of a *hwadu* is to “break through [one’s] ordinary conceptual mode of perception and understanding” so that the practitioner can experience reality “as it is in its totality” (p. 36). This transformation is also identified as the “great death” and “the transformation of the basis.”

The nondual nature of *mom* and *momjit* is also well-articulated in Huayan Buddhism, whose basic tenet is “One is all and all is one.” The mutual identity of the one and the many is an oxymoron if approached from the dualist perspective, but understanding it from the nondual perspective of the *mom/momjit*, it represents a uniquely Buddhist approach to identity: identity is non-identity, and the self always already contains others. Its logic of time is simultaneity rather than temporality.

Park employs the *mom/momjit* paradigm to discuss two major contributions to Korean Buddhism, Wŏnhyo’s (617–686) commentaries on the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith* and Chinul’s (1158–1210) *hwadu* meditation, as well as two major texts used in Zen Buddhism, the *Diamond Sūtra* and the *Platform Sūtra*.

There are several eye-opening moments in this book where the reader will be truly inspired, and this, I believe, comes from the author’s willingness to deal directly with the fundamental issues in philosophical and religious discourse. It is not that these issues have not been tackled by other thinkers; it is just that the author deals with them in a unique way, in the context of personal life experience, that gives them a special meaning. One such moment is when he mentions “the holy nature of death,” stating that “all deaths are perfect and sacred; none is less noble or profound than any other” (p. 74). Here one is able to see that the existential, ethical, philosophical, and religious meanings of death all come together.

The book is written in a way that allows the general public, and not just academics, to appreciate the sophistication of Buddhist philosophy. It can serve as a text for an introductory course on Buddhism or Asian philosophy.